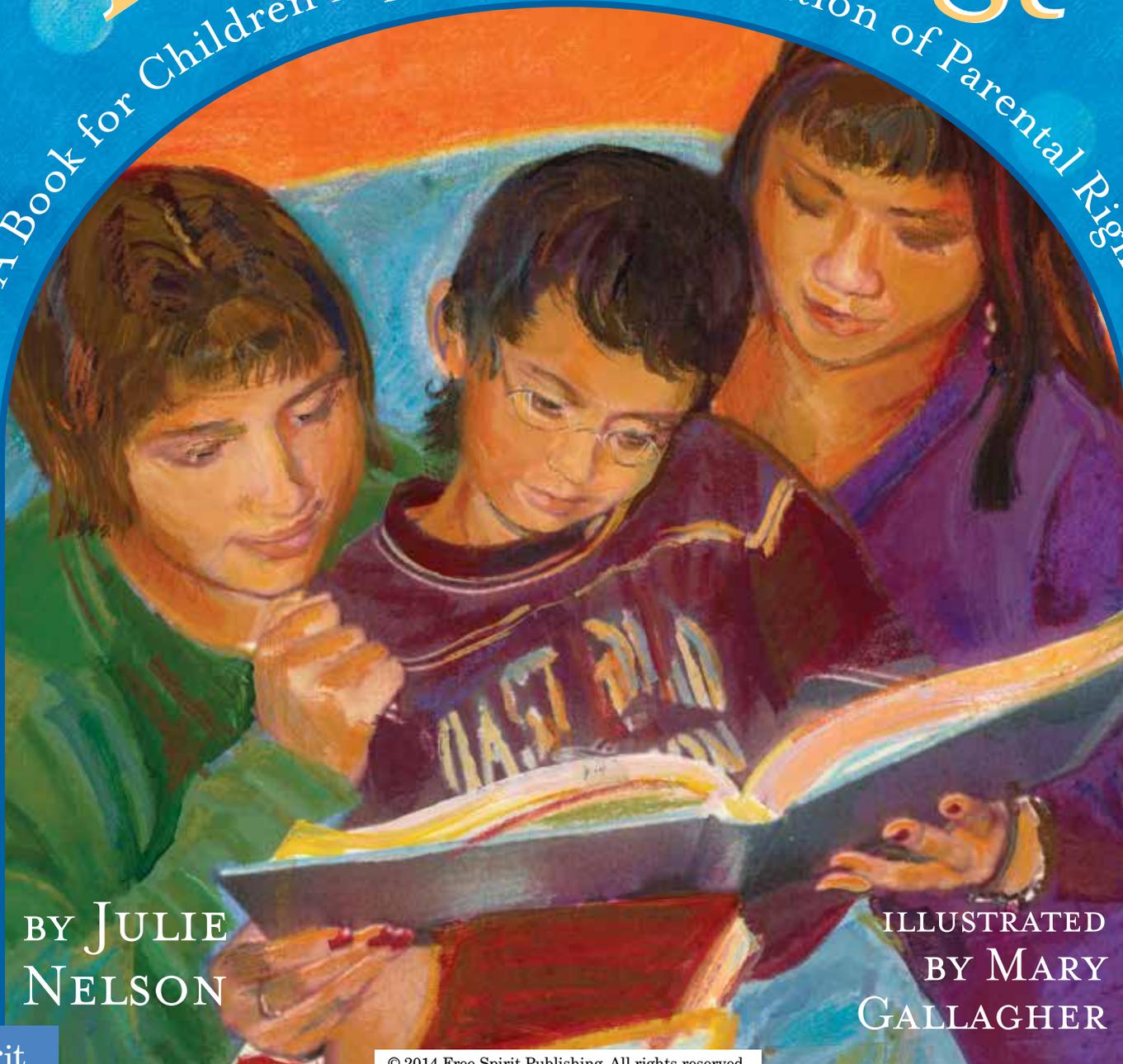


★ Kids Are Important Series
Help for Troubled Times

Families Change

A Book for Children Experiencing Termination of Parental Rights



BY JULIE
NELSON

ILLUSTRATED
BY MARY
GALLAGHER

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PUBLISHING®

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Families Change

Praise for *Kids Need to Be Safe from the Kids Are Important Series*

"Kids Need to Be Safe is incredibly well done!

It is much different from all of the other books for children in foster care that I have read."

—Karen Jorgenson, Executive Director, National Foster Parent Association

"Julie Nelson demonstrates remarkable sensitivity to the needs and feelings of young children in foster care. I'm confident that countless young children will draw strength and comfort from the clear and simple words Ms. Nelson has written for them. And foster parents and other caregivers will find a wealth of wisdom in the information provided for them, particularly in the 'healing words' to use when children are feeling confused and afraid."

**—Martha Farrell Erickson, Ph.D., Senior Fellow & Co-Chair,
President's Initiative on Children, Youth & Families, University of Minnesota**

"This is a wonderful book for foster parents to read to children so they understand why they are in foster care."

—Christa Misiewicz, Social Worker

"*Kids Need to Be Safe* is such a wonderful resource for us as well as our children! We are forwarding the order form you enclosed to our foster parent association in hopes that they will get a copy for all of our foster families!"

—Sonya Sheppard, Senior Foster Care Caseworker

"Julie Nelson is a gifted teacher with a keen understanding of children's needs for ongoing, unconditional emotional support. Her book underscores how important it is for adults to invite children to express their feelings—all of them, including anger and fear—and to explain and interpret adult behavior in terms that children can comprehend."

—Christopher Watson, Center for Early Education & Development, University of Minnesota

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to our parents,
Edward and Johanna Gallagher and Ginger and Luvy Nelson.

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Author's Note

Each child's life experience is unique. Adult readers of this book are encouraged to adapt the language to match the needs and experience of the individual child. If a child has experienced chronic abuse from parents, consult a therapist who understands the child's history to discuss what messages about family history will best support the child's healing.

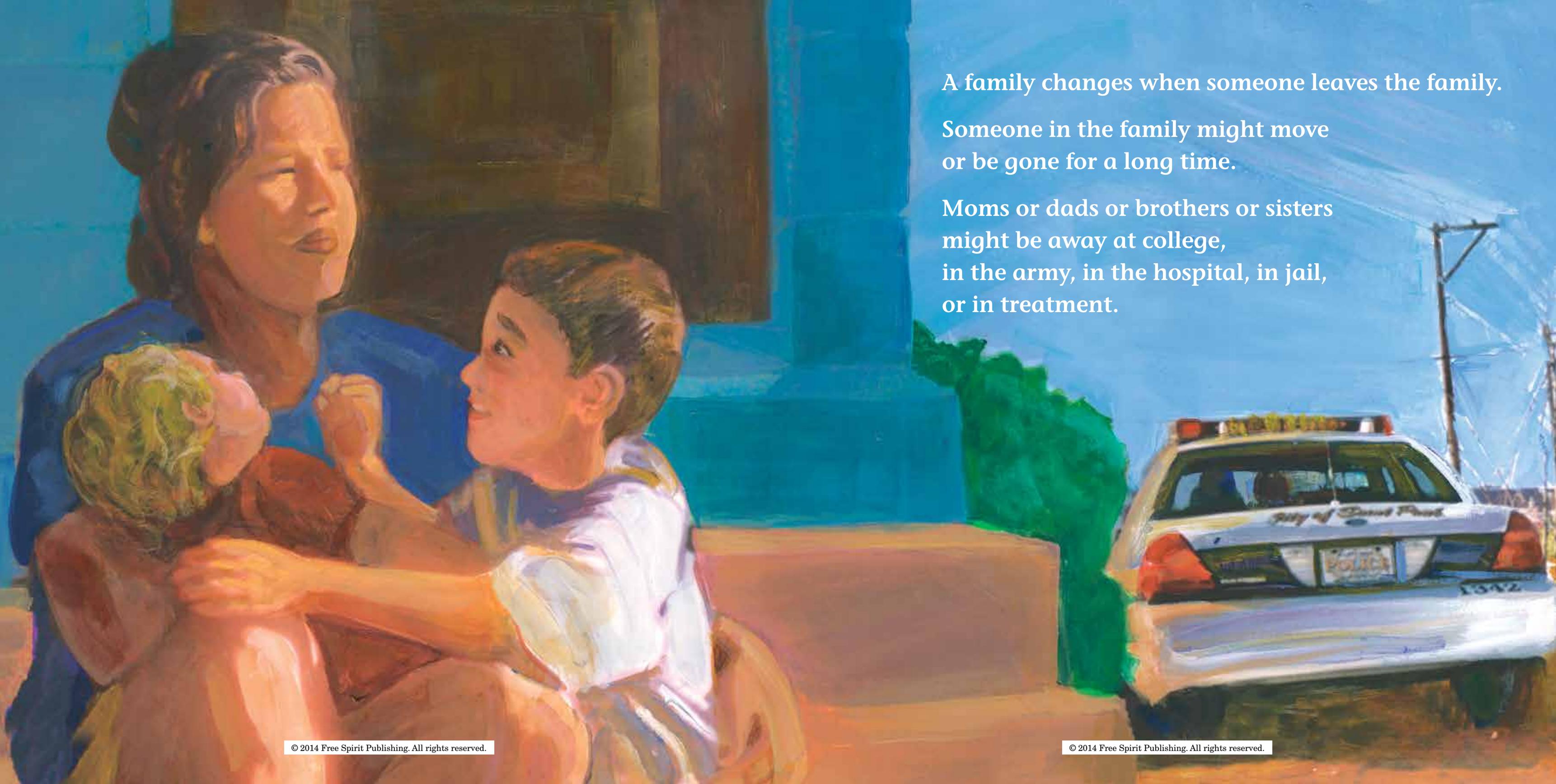


All families change.

A family changes when someone new joins the family.

Sometimes a baby is born or a grown-up gets married.

Sometimes a child gets a new foster parent or new adopted mom or dad.



A family changes when someone leaves the family.

Someone in the family might move or be gone for a long time.

Moms or dads or brothers or sisters might be away at college, in the army, in the hospital, in jail, or in treatment.

Providing Support and Encouragement to Young Children Experiencing Termination of Parental Rights

A message to parents, foster parents, social workers, teachers, and caregivers

Taking care of children who have been removed from their parents' care is a challenging, exhausting, but rewarding task. Young children depend on their relationships with caregivers to validate them. When these relationships include abuse or neglect, or when the relationships are disrupted, children's sense of self-worth, trust, and safety suffer. In addition, termination of parental rights is a trauma that causes grief, stress, and a profound sense of loss, and many children have experienced the additional trauma of multiple placements. Children who have been through this pain may be hard to connect with and are likely to test your commitment to them. But with patience and perseverance you can establish a nurturing, trusting relationship. Use the following guidelines to show children they are important and safe. Remember, professional help is available for you and the children in your care.

ANSWER QUESTIONS

A child experiencing termination of parental rights will have questions and worries about the past, present, and future. *What happened? Is it my fault? Am I safe? Are the important people in my life safe? Will I see my parents again? Who will take care of me? Can I trust you?* Children may ask you some questions directly, while you will see others in their play or in their behavior. As a caring adult, you may wish to protect children from the difficult events that led to the termination of parental rights, but not explaining what has happened may cause children to blame themselves or their foster parents for the change and loss. Instead, invite children to ask questions. Answer them simply and honestly, with respect for their birth family. When you answer children's questions, you help them understand and cope with changes in their lives.

HELP MANAGE STRESS

The stress of family change can be overwhelming. Besides losing their parents, children may lose other family members, their home, toys, clothing, pets, and daily routines. Some children act out from the stress of these losses, screaming, throwing toys, or hitting. Some children shut down by hiding their feelings and rarely talking. The stress children experience is physical, and they may appear hyperactive or have stomachaches, headaches, or difficulty sleeping. Physical exercise and sensory activities such as playing with water or clay can help relieve stress. Encourage outdoor play and other forms of physical activity. You also can reduce stress and help children feel safe and calm by providing predictable, nurturing daily routines. For example, you might eat breakfast together each morning, talk about your day each evening at dinner, and read a story together each night before bed.

UNDERSTAND TRAUMA

Children who experience termination of parental rights often have had other traumatic life experiences. They may have been subjected to family violence, community violence, physical abuse, or sexual abuse. Consider professional therapy to help children's healing. Understand their trauma and be patient when they exhibit behavior that stems from it. Such behavior—and supportive ways to react to it—includes:

- *Hypervigilance.* Children may watch their world closely for signs of danger or loss. Certain sounds or touches, or people coming or leaving, may cause them to worry. Reassure children by patiently explaining what is happening and reminding them they are safe.
- *Flashbacks.* Experiences in the present may trigger emotions from children's past. If children react to a situation much more intensely than seems appropriate, those emotions may be about the past, not the present. Empathize with children's overwhelming emotions while teaching them to regulate the intensity of their reactions so they're more in line with what currently is happening. It may help to say things like, "When there is a little problem, you can be a little mad," or "I can be your partner when you are having really big feelings."
- *Identifying with the aggressor.* Children who have witnessed or been the victim of violence may struggle with feelings of helplessness. They may want to be as strong as the person who caused the hurt, and they may imitate this person to keep from feeling vulnerable. Talk to children about ways they can be strong and safe without being aggressive.

HONOR THE CHILD'S PAST

Children's birth families and birth culture will always be important to them. Help children feel positive about who they are by embracing their heritage and their past. Talk with them about their culture and history. You also can create a memory book, celebrating where the child was born and remembering important people and events in the child's life. Help the child share memories for the book by asking simple questions about toys, foods, places, people, or pets that have been a part of his or her life before coming to you.

BUILD A TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP

Children need positive, stable relationships with the adults who care for them in order to develop a sense of security and self-worth. Since children who have been abused or neglected or who have lost relationships with important people in their lives may have difficulty trusting adults, forming a trusting relationship will take time. Play with the child, laugh with the child, and respond to the child's requests for caregiving with warmth and consistency.

With the support of caring adults, children who are hurting can move from the pain of the past to the promise of the future. Thank you for your support of children.